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ABSTRACT

A change in language laboratory use at the University of North Alabama has given new meaning to the lab requirement and role. While developing a language program, the developer reviewed the language lab's traditional role and found a mixed history with many negative aspects. Personal experience also revealed problems, including: students and teacher never seem to have enough time in class; explanations of procedures are often frustrating for students; a cassette recorder can be as effective as use of the lab; the materials available are sometimes inappropriate; there is little time for students to play back their own recordings; and person-to-person practice makes more sense. As a result, the lab's traditional role has been reversed at the university. It is used for presenting the lesson, and classroom time is used for practice. In the lab, a three-step procedure is used: (1) an upper-level student plays the commercially-produced tapes; (2) a teacher-prepared tape presents the lesson, using classroom-style language; and (3) the student assistant asks if he may help with pronunciation or provide clarification. The tapes and method are currently being refined. A 17-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Reversing the Role of the Foreign Language Lab:
From Practice to Presentation

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In the past two years my enthusiasm for teaching a foreign language has turned from near burn-out to blast-off because of a change in my use of the language laboratory. By reversing the role of the lab from practice to presentation, my class time has become more exciting and more meaningful. This paper will reveal how this came about through a review of my experiences regarding the reality of the lab requirement and the traditional role of the lab as well as a review of the lessons learned through the years.

The Reality of the Lab Requirement

In the fall of 1982 I was recruited to develop a foreign language program at the University of North Alabama. I left a well-oiled program in which we had just purchased our fourth listen-record laboratory, having completely worn out the other three over a twenty-year period. Upon arrival at UNA I discovered that there was a requirement similar to those in many universities for two hours of language lab per week for the elementary classes. Unfortunately, there was no language lab and very few tapes. In a few weeks we miraculously created a listening lab manned by minimally trained upper-level language majors using the regular tapes produced for the textbooks we were using. The labs meet on Tuesday and Thursday: five Spanish, four French, and three German. Upper-level classes use the education library listening facilities with the tapes being handled by the circulation desk.

Throughout this trauma as we struggled with the proposal to ask the university for $35,000 or $40,000 for a language lab, I began to do some soul-searching and reflecting on twenty-two years of teaching of French and Spanish and researching methodology. The first step was to review the effectiveness of the traditional role of the language lab.

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Reviewing the Traditional Role of the Language Lab

A widely cited study entitled *Language Laboratory Facilities* published in 1963 by HEW has a chapter on "Why a Language Lab?" In this rationale Alfred Hayes reminds us that "practice is, then, essential to understanding and speaking a foreign language." Then he concludes in bold print: "To provide this practice is the fundamental role of the language laboratory." (Hayes, p. 15) Soon thereafter in Wilga River's (1968) celebrated text on language teaching methodology, we find the same basic premise that the role of the language lab is for practice of aural and oral skills to accompany the audio-lingual method of developing linguistic habits. She does warn us that there was nothing automatic or certain about the use of the language lab. As a matter of fact, she discusses the negative 1963 Keating study, which though somewhat refuted, cast doubts on the validity of the premises on which the language labs were built.

Those of us who were teaching and using language labs in our methodology were trying desperately to make them genuinely useful and cost-effective. We questioned the results that rarely seemed sommensurate with the expense and time involved. The labs were not living up to expectations even with our best efforts. Some schools kept the five-day-a-week schedule of five regular classes with lab as an optional activity.

The *Language Annual—1967,* published by the Center for Curriculum Development, has an excellent article by Pierre Shertz entitled "What to do with a Language Laboratory?" which was translated from *Le Français dans le Monde.* Shertz enthusiastically gives advice about the use of the lab, but finally concludes that the lab does not appear to him to be "absolutely indispensable," and that as it is presently conceived, "condemns itself and has probably lived out the better part of its life." He does feel that the tape recorder and projector are indispensable to the language teacher (pp. 42-49).

In 1969, Peter Oliva's text on foreign language methodology reflected the traditional role of the language as an essential partner to the audio-lingual method: "The primary function of the language laboratory is the conduct of drill in the foreign language." (Oliva, p. 189) The premise that practice makes perfect is only true, of course, if the practice is proper. It took the Pennsylvania study (Smith, 1968) to begin to slow down the flood of millions of dollars being spent on language laboratory equipment.

In December of 1969, after a statewide, elaborate evaluation, the audio-lingual method, which many classroom teachers doubted from the beginning, and its partner, the language lab, were shown to be houses built on sandy ground. One critic of the study admits: "From the results of the study it cannot be argued that more time in 'habit formation' and drill acquisition in the early phases of language instructions has long-term

benefits that show up only at later stages." (Carroll, p. 235) Students in the Pennsylvania study using more or less traditional methods proved to do as well as or better than audio-lingual students who spent additional time in the language laboratory.

There is an excellent review of the Pennsylvania project as well as three others in an appendix dealing with labs in Chastain's 1971 text on second-language acquisition. In a fair and open-minded treatment of the value of the lab, he reports a condition that still exists somewhat even today: "Neither subjective evaluation nor research evidence has been able to gather sufficient force to convince the profession to use the lab wholeheartedly or to discard it entirely." (Chastain, p. 539)

Three years later in Allen and Valette's textbook (1972, p. 28), we find only two basic paragraphs dealing with the language laboratory. The commentary draws attention to the trend away from language labs to media centers. The 1974 ACTFL Review points out the continuing trend toward media centers. It reports also the lack of enthusiasm on the part of teachers for media centers because of "their past bad experiences with language labs." (Levy, pp. 26-27) In the following ACTFL Review it is reported that the language laboratory has fallen into "disrepute", citing a study that students complain primarily about the lack of coordination between lab and classroom activities, poor equipment, and non-language-oriented lab directors. (Reinert, P. 283)

The sad fact has been, nonetheless, that we have thousands of rooms filled with booths and recorders across the counntry and new labs being installed continually. Some teachers have tenaciously tried to carry on under the assumption that the lab would somehow improve the conversational skills of their students. With the exception of those using the labs for individualized instruction, one finds little clear evidence of their relative value. (Levy, 1974)

By 1982 we begin to see articles like "What Can Be Done with a Language Lab?" This article describes a situation where the old lab is turned into a sort of foreign language students' lounge with a little equipment for their use. (Nimmons) The following year McCoy and Weible make an obvious conclusion to their commentary on language labs:

> For most students, however, the language lab became synonymous with meaningless repetition, an identity which was transferred in part to language learning as a whole. To some extent it is accurate to say that our profession has spent the last 15 years working to overcome the negative effects of this mindless embrace of what should have been a highly helpful instructional medium. (McCoy and Weible, pp. 137-43)

Although the traditional role of the foreign language lab has been a doubtful one from the very start, many of us are still faced with a lab requirement and all the accompanying negatives.

Remembering the Lessons Learned

The second step in my review was to call into focus other factors that my language teaching experience has taught me in addition to the fact that the lab was hardly cost effective if effective at all. The most obvious problem was that the students and the teacher never seemed to have enough time in class. The direct method, which everyone seemed to embrace, takes "forever." The St. Cloud method promised basic conversational skills after 500 contact hours. More recent researchers tell us that 720 contact hours are required to reach a level of 2+ in proficiency. According to my calculations, that might require 17 semesters at one 3-hour course per semester.

Secondly, speaking only the target language in class requires long explanations that are often difficult for students to understand even in English. The level of mental dropout and frustration when students do not know what is going on in class is high indeed. The level of frustration of the *true* beginners in the various direct methods used by the Centre International des Etudes Françaises at the Université de Nice is often high because they do not easily grasp what is taking place in the classes.

A third realization recalled was the genuinely valid use of the lab to present an authentic native model. That, of course, can be accomplished by a simple cassette recorder. In evaluating outstanding programs as a member of various Southern Association of Schools and Colleges evaluation teams, my observations were that the prize-winning private school programs did not rely on or even have a lab, but, they did use records and cassette recorders to present native models.

The fourth item remembered was the hatred developed within students trying to do lab exercises that were too complicated, too fast, and too far removed from their classroom activities. This was one of the first reactions to the new tapes we were using at UNA. The lab assistants were constantly having to stop the tape to explain what was supposed to be going on.

A positive recollection relative to the lab was that it had always been effective to use lab time to give a *dictée*. Each class was sure to get the same dictation, and it tied the lab to the previous classroom activity.

Again on the negative side, there never seened to be enough time in the typical college lab structure for the student to play back what he had recorded for comparative examination. Even when some time was available for playback comparison, most students could only conclude that they do

not sound like the native. Unless they had a superior aural-oral mechanism, which is rare, correction was virtually impossible without the aid of a teacher. As a result of this experience and other evidence, I did not push for a listen-record lab. (Johnson, 1966)

Through my review of the variety of recent strategies for second-language acquisition, I came to the conclusion that the role of the language lab is negligible. Professor Rassias's effective use of student assistants is a good example of an alternative.

Last, and certainly not least, my recollection was that the primary obstacles in the development of communication skills, for which the lab was designed, were the psychological barriers resulting from real personal interaction. The only way I had ever seen these barriers overcome was in the process of *human* interaction. The affective domain of direct human communication cannot be duplicated in a man to machine relationship. Person-to-person practice is the only logical training ground. The human affective elements of interference simply do not exist when a human faces a machine, nor even a video. Recent scholarship attests to the importance of dealing with affective barriers. (Higgs, p. 3)

Reversing the Role

With all those factors in mind, it was disconcerting to observe the first-year labs doing business as usual. The tapes were too difficult, the same old negative attitudes were present among the students, and the usual nagging doubts existed with the teachers. At that point, I realized what we had known from the outset. Looking back at the 1963 HEW publication on language laboratories, sandwiched in the midst of Hayes's pro-lab rationale, he states the obvious: "A competent teacher, who makes the best use of time, and has access to good materials, can indeed successfully provide the kind of practice required." (Hayes, p. 15)

How could we find time to have more practice in class and not spend so much time explaining and presenting the lesson, even though we customarily used the target language? The answer was so apparent that it was embarrasing. The lab could be used for presenting the lesson, and class time could be used for practice.

We are now into the second year of reversing the lab's role by using it to present the lesson rather than to practice it. Our procedure involves three basic steps.

Step one: An upper-level student who has had at least two years of the language, preferably a major with some personality as well as skill, plays the first portion of the tapes produced by the textbook company in order to give some practice in pronunciation and to give an opportunity for hearing authentic, varied models.

Step Two: A cassette tape made by me in English presents the lesson (twenty-one per semester) in three parts: pronunciation, grammar, and exercises. In going over the pronunciation I try to use the same language one might use in the classroom: "Let's do that again. That's a tough one." Occasionally, my bloops and bleepers are not deleted. The students love them. Contrary to what professionally prepared tapes do, special attention is given to exceptions and omissions such as "Notice that I do not pronounce the "e" in *samedi*." As for the grammar, what is in the textbook is read with pauses for pronunciation practice and additional commentary. When we come to the exercises, the purpose of each one is explained and they are given clear instructions about what will be expected of them in class: "This is what I will say in class . . ., and this is what you will say. . . ." Part if not all of each exercise is practiced.

Step Three: At the conclusion of the tape the student assistants ask if they may help with any pronunciation problems or in clarifying an explanation or exercise.

One other lab activity not a part of the presentation is a *dictée* on the previous lesson.

Results of the Reversal

There are several positive results:

1. The rate of withdrawal from the elementary classes has been reduced from 28 percent to 10 percent with no change in testing standards or rate of progress. We still cover twenty-one lessons per semester.
2. The average grades have increased at least one letter. After my first year, the Dean noted that my grades were a bit low. This past summer, his red pen noted on my grade distribution sheet that my grades were slightly above the university average.
3. Lab attendance is much greater than in the past.
4. Attention during the lab sessions is nearly perfect with students taking notes and pronouncing aloud with little or no encouragement necessary.
5. Students who miss lab can get a thorough explanation of the lesson by listening to a copy of the tape, which is put into the School of Education library at the conclusion of the regular lab. The students are very happy with this arrangement since it allows them to catch up easily without having to track down the teacher or another student for help.
6. There is adequate class time to practice the exercises and genuine conversation.

7. More importantly, I am enthusiastic about what I am doing because it makes sense to me. Given the required conditions and circumstances, I feel that we are making the best use of our class time.

If what Professor Higgs says is true, then the last result is definitely a significant step forward: "The affective environment in the classroom may well be more influenced by a teacher's feeling of confidence than by externally imposed considerations of methodology." (Higgs, p. 3)

On the negative side, the vital visual element is limited during the presentation to what is in the textbook, unless the lab assistant uses the board in making a point of clarification.

Refining the Reversal

During this present year, the presentation tapes have been improved to include more explanation about the exercises. There is a search in progress for a textbook that includes more thorough explanations in English, which will in turn make the lab sessions more comprehensible. If our budget requests are granted, we will move enthusiastically toward putting the presentations on video cassettes which would, of course, greatly improve the visual stimulus. (Berwald, 1970) The video cassette will, undoubtedly, be a significant improvement on what is already proving to be a more meaningful use of the language laboratory.

We are only in the second year of this experiment, and only about three hundred students have been involved. Yet, intuitively, it seems to be a viable, logical alternative. The true value will be determined by the degree of success of our students' acquisition of a second language.

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